

Book review: Unmarked Graves - Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia

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Book review

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Hearman, Vannessa (2018), *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia* Singapore: NUS Press, ISBN: 978-981-4722-94-0, 288 pages, \$38.00 SGD.

Although the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was the world's third largest communist party in 1965, claiming to have 27 million members, within five years it had been completely destroyed. Research into the 1965–1966 anti-communist violence and what led to the end of the Sukarno era in Indonesia is currently booming. The recent fiftieth anniversary of the mass killings stimulated a number of journal special issues and a range of new studies on this controversial topic which touches on events that have not yet been fully unravelled. There are also dozens of autobiographies by survivors for whom time to speak out is fast running out. These attempts to reconstruct the historical circumstances before, during, and after the collective violence have, of course, implications for the present-day politics in Indonesia, where the remaining survivors still await proper official recognition of the hardship they endured and restitution for injustices against them.

Hearman's fine study joins this rapidly growing body of literature on Indonesia's repression of communism and of any suspected communist sympathisers. Rather than refining the meta-narrative about the defeat of Indonesia's left with new detail that has begun to emerge with increasing intensity ever since the downfall of Suharto's New Order regime, Hearman directs attention to the ordinary communists and sympathisers to illustrate what systematic oppression and marginalisation meant for them once the mass killings had come to an end. In her study, she relies on the accounts of more than thirty victims of anti-communist repression whom she interviewed to find out about what their lives were like after they had lost their jobs, when they went into hiding, were arrested and were in prison, and after they had been released from prison. While some informants preferred to remain anonymous, others insisted that their full names and photos of them be used in this book. This individualised long-term perspective reveals that the ongoing repression of anybody associated with the Indonesian left, no matter how vaguely, was a fundamental ingredient of the New Order regime after Suharto took over from the founding President Sukarno.



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Although other researchers have paid special attention to the regional dimensions of the events surrounding the mass killings in East Java and other provinces, Hearman revisits East Java in order to provide a more holistic picture of what happened there before and after the mass violence. At the time, East Java was not only one of the most densely populated provinces in Java with a large number of landless peasants but also home of the mass religious organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and a stronghold of Masyumi, a major Muslim party and one of the PKI's main competitors. In offering a regional analysis of the anti-communist repression, Hearman's aim is to contribute to the historiography of the Indonesian left and individual non-elite activists a perspective that has been missing so far, not least because of the scarcity of written documents. On the one hand, this oral-history approach is to be applauded, because, even nowadays, challenging the New Order representation of 1965–1966 is not without risk for those who dare testify against the public version, as repeated attempts to intimidate witnesses and victims have shown over the years. On the other hand, relying on traumatic memories also calls for extra caution. Much of what people remember of traumatic events tends to be filtered or tainted by later events that may contort or add additional colour to the interpretation of those traumatic events which seemed far beyond any sensible explanation at the time they occurred. In my view, a few links to the existing literature on memory, affect, and narration would have been of great use here to reveal what Hearman considered in collecting, analysing, and cross-checking the data.

Despite its harrowing content, Hearman's study is a pleasant read, as it is well-written and elegantly combines macro-level developments with intimate and personal accounts of those she studied. While situating the protagonists and their life stories within the larger context of the intensifying Cold War and the economic, political, and military attacks the young Indonesian Republic suffered, such as rebellions in the outer islands and the disadvantageous financial arrangements with the Dutch, Hearman takes serious aim at the motivations and personal ambitions of individuals one might have hoped would contribute to positive change in society, especially among the rural poor. Most of the protagonists Hearman introduces in chapter 2 were politically engaged before they joined the PKI or one of its associated mass organisations. Their engagement included defending Indonesia's independence against returning Dutch colonisers as well as literacy campaigns and practical matters such as pest control, household hygiene, and non-violent education for children. The explanations of why these selected informants chose to engage with the PKI make the party's success in attracting so many people through its election campaign and other programmes plausible; the PKI became the fourth largest party in the 1955 general election.

Chapter 3 gives a detailed account of the killings after the so-called 30 September 1965 movement that was loosely affiliated with some PKI leaders who sought to prevent a supposed coup by the military by striking first. Although she relies to a certain extent on the work of colleagues who have interviewed perpetrators, Hearman has also managed to gather new archival evidence and accounts from eye witnesses. By comparing two East Javanese towns, Kediri and Bangil, she eloquently shows local differences and why violence was worse in some sites than others. Here Hearman again refers to previous events deemed primarily responsible for the intensity of the anti-communist violence,

such as the 1948 Madiun Affair, PKI members' confrontations with Muslim groups and, most importantly, the PKI's support for the enforcement of land reform that saw the acquisition and redistribution of thousands of rice fields. After discussing the technicalities of the killings, often perpetrated by Muslim youth groups, Hearman has paid sufficient attention to the conditions of arrest and imprisonment of suspected sympathisers, who were, according to those who arrested them, locked away for their "own good". Given the speed with which so many arrests were made and the lack of any preparations to hold and feed several thousand people for any length of time, the conditions in the makeshift prison camps were appalling.

Once the intensity of killings slowed at the end of 1965, those who had escaped arrest and violence were still anything but safe. As searches and sweepings continued, anybody suspected of leftist inclinations had to leave their homes behind. While some fugitives could stay with relatives away from East Java, others opted for the anonymity of big cities such as Surabaya and Jakarta, where newcomers did not come under suspicion. In chapter 4, Herman cites a number of examples of sympathisers organising safe houses and circles of solidarity. The daily struggle for mere survival, however, offered little room for the PKI to engage in active resistance and even reconsolidation. After General Suharto had succeeded getting Sukarno to hand over power in March 1966, the PKI and its many related mass organisations were eventually officially banned, driving the survivors of the mass killings further underground.

It was not until 1967 that surviving PKI cadres attempted to rebuild the party in remote parts of Eastern Java, orienting the party towards the model of Chinese communists in their retreat to Yenan province in the 1930s. Abandoning their city hideouts, fugitives moved to the countryside to establish a base under a new PKI leadership in and around South Blitar, as Hearman details in chapter 5. Fronting the ocean, this underdeveloped location had some tactical advantages because of its difficult access by road. Once the military struck hard under Operation Trisula, they were left with few places to run to. There are many reasons for the failure of the remaining and severely weakened PKI, including premature guerrilla strikes to seek revenge against Muslim leaders and members of the military who had been involved in the killings, which attracted unfortunate attention, the infiltration of the PKI's underground network by Muslim spies, and the treason of captured PKI leaders. About 2000 people died under the Operation Trisula. Unlike in 1965–1966, Muslim groups were less involved in hunting down the communists, and the high-ranking PKI members who were captured were not killed instantly but stood trial, with some being imprisoned for life and others ending up on death row for many years before they were executed. Mentioned in this chapter briefly, but written about in more detail by Hearman in previous publications, was the considerable international interest, sustained by the exchange of letters between penpals, in the destiny of those political prisoners.

The army's interference in daily affairs in Blitar during and long after Operation Trisula is the main focus of chapter 6, but here Hearman focuses on the perspectives of villagers who suffered greatly from forced labour, forced participation in sweepings and, later, the forced relocation of their homes, aimed at complete remodelling local society. In this chapter, Hearman also pays attention to the differences in forms of violence

experienced by women and children, particularly orphans. Because of her profound empathy and very detailed descriptions, I gained a thorough sense as a reader of what it was like to conduct research with and among these villagers who still face a higher degree of social control and scrutiny by the authorities in their daily lives compared with other parts of Indonesia.

Hearman ends the book by zooming out from East Java and embedding her findings in the macro-political constellation of the Cold War, revealing a rather weak response from a socialist camp divided along the lines of the Sino-Soviet split. While there continues to be some international interest in directing attention to the reconstruction of the events that surrounded the unmaking of Indonesia's left, such as Joshua Oppenheimer's films and the International People's Tribunal held in Den Haag in 2015, those with an interest in keeping the brutal truth firmly hidden in the dark are still very powerful in Indonesia. There are many more follow-up studies to be done in Indonesia and abroad in order to shed more light onto this chapter of Indonesia's history, which is often considered one of the darkest. It is to be hoped that Hearman's book and the work of her colleagues will prove useful in inspiring such studies.

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